

The Social Science Centre (Lincoln): a new model for higher and co-operative education.

The Social Science Centre (SSC) provides an opportunity for students and academics to have a very special co-operative experience of higher education. All courses at SSC are taught and assessed at the same level as similar courses in mainstream universities in the UK. The courses are taught by experienced academics, including professors and lecturers with national and international reputations based on the quality of their scholarship in the social sciences.

One of the unique features of the Centre is that it is run as a 'not-for-profit' workers' co-operative. The Centre is managed on democratic, non-hierarchical principles with all students and staff having an equal involvement in how the Centre operates

The co-operative principles on which the management of the Centre is based extend to the ways in which courses are taught. All classes will be participative and collaborative, so as to include the experience and knowledge of the student as an intrinsic part of the course. Students will have the chance to design courses with the professors and lecturers, as well as deliver some of the teaching themselves with support from other students and the teaching staff. Students will be able to work with academics on research projects as well as publish their own writings. A core principle of the Centre is that teachers and students have much to learn from each other.

SSC provides a learning experience based on academic values, including critical thinking, experimentation, sharing, peer review, co-operation, collaboration, openness, debate and constructive disagreement. The subjects taught at the Centre are the core subjects in social science: Sociology, Politics and Philosophy. The Centre will provide teaching at all levels including undergraduate, Masters and Doctorates in Philosophy.

The Centre is entirely self-funded. All members of the Centre will pay an annual subscription, based on the level of their salary. For those students and academics who are unemployed or are on a low income there will be no membership charge. The Centre accepts monies, and other forms of 'payment in kind', from donors who share our ethics and values. The Centre staff will donate their time and expertise freely and will not receive any payment. The Centre is designed for students who do not wish to take on the burden of debt currently imposed by the government, but do wish to receive a higher level of education.

Students will not leave the Centre with a university degree, but they will have a learning experience that is equivalent to the level of a degree. Each student will receive a certificate in higher education, with an extensive written transcript detailing their academic and intellectual achievements. The Centre believes that given the current constraints of university teaching, the Centre will provide academics and students with a learning and teaching experience that compares favourably with what is provided by English universities.

By joining the Centre students will be part of a unique experiment in higher education. We think this experiment in co-operative learning has the potential to transform the way in which higher education is designed and delivered.

The Centre will make use of the most up to date educational technologies, but this is not an online or web-based provision. It is important that the Centre is in a real space at the heart of its local community.

Currently the Centre is looking for premises. Options being explored include rooms in the Work Skills building in Mint Lane, Lincoln, and sharing premises with other educational providers, including the university, as well as local museums and libraries.

It is envisaged that the Centre will have about twenty students at any one time, and a pool of about twenty lecturers. All students will be part-time, with most teaching taking place in the evenings and at weekends. While a full time degree normally takes three years, it is envisaged that students at the Centre will take up to six years to obtain their undergraduate certificate in higher education, up to four years for the equivalent of a Masters and up to eight years for the equivalent to a PhD.

While this Centre is located in Lincoln and based around the Social Sciences it is hoped and expected this model of small scale, self-funded higher education provision will be adapted for different subject areas and in different locations nationally and internationally. These multi-various Centres will provide a supportive and co-operative network to further advance this sustainable and resilient model for higher education.

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University of Lincoln
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<http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk>

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Joss Winn works in the Centre for Educational Research and Development at the University of Lincoln, focusing on the development, use and politics of technology for research, teaching and learning. Joss grew up in Lincoln, left in 1990 and returned in 2007, having worked as an Archivist at the British Film Institute and Amnesty International. Prior to this, he studied Buddhist Studies at the University of London (SOAS) and the University of Michigan (USA), where he also taught undergraduates for two years.

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